



March 26, 2020

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor
State of California



The Honorable Toni Atkins
President pro Tempore
California State Senate



The Honorable Anthony Rendon
Speaker of the Assembly
California State Assembly



Dear Governor Newsom, President pro Tempore Atkins and Speaker Rendon,



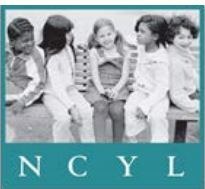
The over 60,000 children and youth in California's foster care system are among the most marginalized members of our society. Removed from their families due to abuse and neglect, their trauma is often compounded by the instability they experience while in foster care, through placement and school changes.



COVID-19 poses a special risk to children and youth in foster care, who are the legal dependents of the State of California. While California's response to COVID-19 is critical for all, children and youth in foster care uniquely rely on the public child welfare system to ensure their economic, emotional and educational well-being. It is critical that the State of California act swiftly and responsibly to address these urgent needs.



Provided below is a summary of some of the most urgent needs facing children and youth in foster care related to the COVID-19 pandemic, together with policy recommendations to address these needs. The undersigned organizations urge the Administration and the California State Legislature to adopt the recommendations as part of California's COVID-19 response and relief efforts.



Recommendation #1: Provide emergency financial relief to caregivers and youth impacted by COVID-19.



California has a strong community of caregivers, 40 percent of whom are relatives and are more than twice as likely to be living at or below the federal poverty level than non-relatives. These caregivers face new challenges as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.



Many have lost their jobs while others will require more childcare due to school closures. Older youth in foster care, aged 18 to 21, also face serious challenges from COVID-19, as

their hours of employment are reduced or they are laid off. It is critical that we support caregivers and young adults in foster care during this time and to do so we recommend policymakers take the following actions:

- Increase the monthly foster care payments across all programs by \$400 per child or youth and increase the infant supplement by \$400 per child per month for at least 6 months.
- Establish a \$10M Foster Youth College Relief Fund for college students who have exited foster care who are facing food or housing insecurity or other emergency needs. At campuses with existing foster youth campus support programs, funds would be distributed through this program. At campuses without such a program, the campus financial aid or equity office would administer this program.
- Inform nonminor dependents who have become unemployed or had hours reduced due to COVID-19 about the availability of unemployment benefits and recovery rebates included in the federal stimulus package.
- Waive face-to-face interviews for CalFresh, authorize the use of CalFresh for online purchasing with the use of EBT and provide guidance to nonminor dependents and caregivers about how to access CalFresh.

Recommendation #2: Ensure stability of foster care placements

Studies show one of the most traumatic aspects of foster care for children and youth is placement instability. COVID-19 poses a serious threat to destabilizing foster care placement by undermining the economic stability of the families and providers who care for them. Action can be taken now to preserve Resource Families and providers and maintain placements. We recommend policymakers take a Housing First approach through the following actions:

- Place a 180-day moratorium on discharge of non-minor dependents from extended foster care unless the youth no longer wishes to participate in the program. This includes suspending school and work requirements as a condition of nonminor dependent placement for 180 days.
- Preserve placements by enforcing current law requiring the development and implementation of placement preservation strategies prior to a written 14-day notice, including for nonminor dependents in all placements for the next 180 days. Issue guidance emphasizing that multiple placement preservation strategies should be used and how to implement strategies during a public health crisis.

Recommendation #3: Immediately remove obstacles to distance learning, telehealth, visitation, and permanency

COVID-19 has created new obstacles for children and youth in foster care, further complicating the child welfare system's ability to achieve the permanency, safety and well-being goals of children and youth. This includes facilitating access to education, medical and mental health care, and visitation with siblings

and parents. These services are critical now as youth are more isolated which can exacerbate their needs. We recommend policymakers take the following actions:

- Ensure every foster youth has access to a laptop, WiFi and a telephone for remote learning, telehealth appointments, visitation, child and family team meeting participation and other connectivity needs, without the requirement to verify dependency status.
- Waive health and safety inspections for Supervised Independent Living Placements for the next 90 days for any non-minor dependents changing placements, not solely those moving due to campus closures.
- Authorize virtual completion of the voluntary re-entry agreement and other required documents for nonminor dependents re-entering foster care without a face-to-face contact.
- Suspend the annual Resource Family Approval updates, until the shelter-in-place order is lifted, unless significant changes have occurred in the Resource Family home since the completion of the existing approval which warrant such an update, such as a change in marital status, moving to a new location, birth of a child, an adult moving into the home.
- Authorize the use of online signatures to process and finalize adoptions.
- Allow virtual interviews for the Resource Family Approval process rather than in person/in home.
- Direct the California Student Aid Commission to distribute Chafee Education and Training Voucher payments to youth attending college electronically or distribute directly to the student in the current term and until campuses reopen.

Recommendation #4: Include the needs of marginalized and disconnected youth in California’s COVID-19 response

Over the last five years, on average, youth have made up ten percent of California’s Homeless Point-in-Time Count. A total of 79 percent are unsheltered youth, putting them at heightened risk for COVID-19 exposure. To ensure the well-being of marginalized and disconnected youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, we recommend policymakers take the following actions:

- Immediately issue funding for the Transitional Housing Program and Housing Navigation Program by suspending the regulatory requirement that counties submit a signed resolution from their County Board of Supervisors, authorize the rollover of unutilized funds to FY 21 and issue FY 21 funding by July 31, 2020.
- Require a minimum of ten percent of homelessness funding included in the FY 21 state budget be dedicated to establish or expand services meeting the needs of homeless youth or youth at risk of homelessness, including student homelessness.
- Allocate \$30 million to California’s 44 Continuums of Care to award grant funding to youth providers through the Homeless Emergency Aid Program to address the immediate needs of youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Thank you very much for your time and attention. Our organizations are available as a resource to support youth, child welfare providers, policymakers and funders during this time of emergency.

Respectfully,

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John Burton Advocates for Youth

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